Tehama County
Groundwater Demand Management Survey 2025

Report developed by the Consensus Building Institute for GSA Staff | Updated 12.1.2025

Overview

Context and Purpose

To support the implementation of the Sustainable Groundwater Management Act (SGMA), the Tehama County Flood Control and Water Conservation District (District) – the Groundwater Sustainability Agency (GSA) for Tehama County – has been considering approaches that increase supplies, reduce demand, and mitigate dry wells.

Community input is critical to the success of any SGMA demand management program. In summer-fall 2025, the District solicited **community input on the development of a Groundwater Demand Management Program** through a survey and factsheet (Appendices A and B).

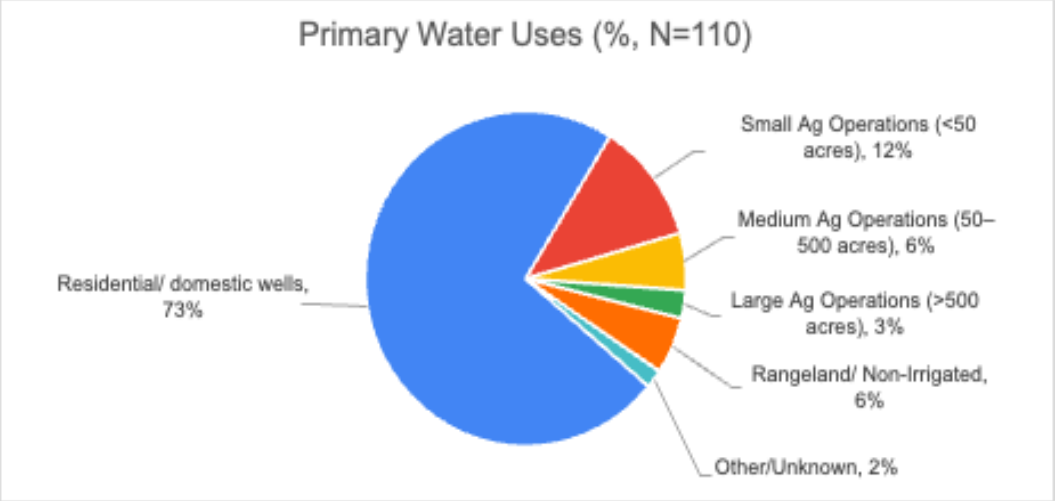
This report summarizes the feedback received from 110 respondents representing residential, agricultural, and commercial interests across the county.

Key Takeaways

- The survey respondents were predominantly **residential/domestic use well owners** (85-90%), and most respondents owned wells in **Red Bluff and Corning**.
- Respondents valued groundwater sustainability; however, their top priorities and concerns revolved around **costs and fairness**.
- They strongly preferred structures that would **recognize reduced or responsible use** (e.g., conservation or incentivized decreased pumping).
- There was a strong preference for a **"tailored" fee structure** over a flat fee, suggesting respondents wanted costs to be proportional to impact/usage.
- Responses indicated the community wants **more specifics** before they're ready to commit to supporting any specific approach.
- Regardless, respondents generally preferred **local management** over State Intervention, provided that the local program is **fair, protects low water users, and recognizes good stewardship.**
- The survey findings align with public comments received during Board of Directors and Groundwater Commission meetings, **confirming that fairness and affordability are top priorities** (validating the current criteria for narrowing down options).

Who Responded

110 valid responses were collected between August 8 and October 10, 2025 (3 responses were essentially blanks). Respondents were primarily residential well owners, with Red Bluff and Corning being the most represented subbasins. Agricultural operations ("Ops") participation was much smaller but still informative.



Based on 110 valid responses:

- Residential/domestic wells: ~80
- Small Ag Ops (<50 acres): ~13
- Medium Ag Ops (50–500 acres): ~6
- Large Ag Ops (>500 acres): ~3
- Rangeland/Non-Irrigated: ~6
- Other/Unknown: ~2

Well Locations

- Red Bluff: ~49
- Corning: ~22
- Bowman: 17
- Antelope: 11
- Los Molinos: ~11

Note: Numbers are approximate because three respondents owned wells in multiple subbasins, and many indicated they used groundwater for both residential/domestic uses and another category.

Big Picture Themes

Across responses, the following themes arose:

- **Fairness first** - preference for those who use the most water to pay their fair share, and those who conserve are rewarded
- **Financial stress** - households/small farms operating on tight budgets; keep costs as low as possible
- **Well Reliability -** protect those most vulnerable to declining groundwater impacts
- **Local control** - keep management in Tehama County, not the State
- **Trust & Transparency** - be clear about how decisions are made and present evidence that management actions and projects are data-driven and minimize unintended consequences

Specific Findings

Management Zones: Overall Support

There was more support than opposition for the concept of management zones (creating zones based on groundwater conditions with different fees/restrictions if triggered). However, a large middle group wanted more information. Perspectives varied across subbasins and within, indicating a need for tailored messaging and outreach for each subbasin.

Overall

- Strong support/Support if fair: 33%
- Neutral/Need more info: 26%
- Oppose: 18%
- Not answered: 24%

Subbasin

- Red Bluff: Most supportive (38% support; 23% opposed)
- Corning: More polarized (24% strongly support; 14% strongly oppose)
- Los Molinos: Most concerned (30% oppose)
- Antelope: Generally supportive (36%; 0% explicit opposition)
- Bowman: Nearly evenly split

Water Use Type

- Medium and large ag operations highly supported using management zones (67%)
- Some small ag operations supported management zones (23%), but most were neutral or uncertain
- Domestic users were more divided, with 23% supporting management zones and 21% opposing (48% were neutral or uncertain)

Fee Structure Preferences (Option A: Simple vs Option B: Tailored)

Overall, respondents tended to favor Option B (tailored fee structure), especially among domestic well owners. Domestic users preferred a more complex administrative system, as long as it guaranteed that costs would be strongly tied to usage/impact. Small ag operations appeared to worry that a "Simple/Flat" fee (Option A) would make them to pay a disproportionately high share of the costs relative to their actual impact. They wanted a system that distinguishes them from large ag operations. There was not a notable trend among the small sample size of large ag operations (one preferred Option A, one preferred Option B, and one did not provide an answer).

Overall

- Option A (simple): 17%
- Option B (tailored): 46%
- Neutral/no preference: 10%
- Not answered: 26%

Subbasin

All subbasins preferred Option B (tailored) over Option A (simple)

- Los Molinos: 60% (vs. 10% for A)
- Red Bluff: 48% (vs. 23% for A)

- Corning: 43% (vs. 10% for A)
- Bowman 41% (vs. 18% for A)
- Antelope: 36% (vs. 9% for A)

Water Use Type

- Residential users favored Option B (tailored) (50%) over Option A (simple)(16%)
- Small ag operations strongly favored Option B (56%) over Option A (11%)
- Large ag operations and rangeland owners were split evenly

Financial Situation

Subbasin

Residents, especially in Corning Subbasin, indicated they were fee averse. Red Bluff showed a more nuanced mix of willingness and concern, indicating the groundwater concerns may be overriding general anti-fee sentiment.

I understand groundwater management requires fees, but my budget is limited.

- Corning: 43%
- Red Bluff: 21%

I do not want any more fees, but I prefer local control over State…

- Corning: 29%
- Red Bluff: 29%

Local control and groundwater protection are important to me; I am willing to pay my share

- Corning: 0%
- Red Bluff: 21%

Antelope and Los Molinos respondents tended to select "Prefer not to answer" (50% of respondents in each basin).

Water Use Type

"Willingness to Pay" scaled with size, with large ag operations being the most willing to pay in exchange for retaining local control. Medium and small ag operations indicated they were significantly more constrained by "Limited Budgets." Most residential well owners cited limited budget concerns or at least a preference for local control.

- Residential only: Limited budget (29%) or preferred local control over State (23%)
- Small Ag Operations/Mixed: Limited budget (23%) or preferred local control (15%)
- Medium Ag Ops: Limited budget (67%) or prefer local control (33%)
- Large Ag Operations: prefer local control (67%) or willing to pay (33%)

Priorities and Concerns

Priorities

Respondents prioritized affordability above all else, with "Keeping costs/fees low" ranking as the top priority for almost every group, including residential users, small ag operations, and rangeland owners. Large agricultural operations diverged from this trend, prioritizing "Flexibility to adapt to conditions," indicating they are more concerned about overly corrective/rigid management actions.

Overall

Top 5 Priorities across all 110 respondents:

1. Keeping costs/fees low (45%)
2. Protecting small farms and rural residents (32%)
3. Ensuring fairness across all users (28%)
4. Local control over decisions (21%)
5. Protecting property values (17%)

Calculation Note: Total percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to 3 options.

Top Priority by Subbasin

- Corning: "Keeping costs low"
- Red Bluff: "Keeping costs low"
- Antelope: "Property values"
- Los Molinos: "Ensuring fairness"
- Bowman: "Keeping costs low"

Top Priority Water Use Type

- Residential well owners, small ag operations, and rangelands cited "Keeping costs low" as their top priority.
- Large ag operations selected "Flexibility to adapt to conditions" as their top priority.

Top Water Restriction Concerns

The top two concerns were tied for first place, highlighting the dual pressures facing respondents:

1. "Too costly for my operation/household" (40%)
2. "Fairness of how restrictions are applied" (40%)
3. "Domestic well reliability" (31%)
4. "Loss of local control" (25%)
5. "Impact on property values" (23%)

Calculation Note: Total percentages exceed 100% because respondents could select up to 3 options.

Additional concerns included expanding government actions, blaming large ag operations, stopping water inefficiencies, and ineffective management (moving too fast or too slow).

Top Concern by Subbasin

- Corning: "Costs"
- Red Bluff: "Fairness"
- Antelope: "Fairness" and "Well Reliability"

- Los Molinos: "Costs" and "Fairness"
- Bowman: "Costs" and "Fairness"

Top Concern Water Use Type

- Residential well owners' top concerns were "Fairness" and "Costs"
- Small ag operations were most concerned about "Costs"
- Large ag operations selected "Fairness" as their top concern.
- Rangeland owners were most concerned about "Losing Local Control"

Comments on Additional Challenges

Based on 46 substantive open-ended responses, the feedback revealed deep skepticism and anxiety regarding proposed groundwater management fees. Even the supportive voices emphasized transparency, fairness, and scientific rigor.

The concerns coalesced around five primary themes: fairness concerns, financial vulnerability, distrust of governance and data, unintended risks, and environmental values. The comments elevated a sixth theme – many concerns were based on inaccurate narratives, emphasizing a need to clarify truths vs. falsehoods.

1. Fairness Narratives: A Multi-faceted Two-Sided "Us vs. Them" Dynamic

The most pervasive sentiment was a fractured "Us vs. Them" dynamic, but it was not a simple story.

- Residential Upset: Residential well owners overwhelmingly felt they were being penalized for depletion caused by large-scale agriculture. Many stated that their domestic usage is negligible compared to "corporate ranches" and "massive orchards," noting that their water tables only drop when agricultural irrigation begins in the spring. There was strong resistance to subsidizing commercial operations, with explicit calls to "meter the corporate ranches" rather than "taxing households that use water for basic survival."
- Small Farmer Pressures: Agricultural respondents (80% of whom were small family farms under 50 acres or livestock operations) revealed a secondary inequity. These farmers felt unfairly grouped together with "Big Ag" and punished by "blunt instruments" that treat all agriculture the same.
    - Several farmers noted they made responsible investments to farm on land with abundant water, yet they were being "punished to support others" who chose to farm in unsustainable locations.
    - Small farming operations cautioned that rigid fees and restrictions wouldn't just cut into profits—they would threaten the "destruction of life savings" and the loss of multi-generational family investments.
- Large Ag Operations Pragmatism: Due to the very small sample size among survey respondents, it is challenging to draw broader conclusions about large ag operations. However, of these respondents, there was an acknowledgement that some level of demand management is necessary to retain local control and even a willingness to pay their fair

share, but they strongly call for enough flexibility and not over-corrective measures.

There were a handful of responses that identified opportunities to address the “Us vs. Them” narrative. Respondents urged for different water users to find shared goals and approach the groundwater issues as partners.

2. Financial Vulnerability

A significant portion of respondents identified as retirees or residents on fixed incomes who cannot absorb additional costs. Several noted they have already incurred heavy costs deepening wells or replacing pumps and had no remaining budget for District fees. For this demographic, fee increases were viewed as a threat to their ability to remain in their homes.

3. Distrust of Governance and Science

While there was a strong preference for local over state control, comments revealed a need for greater transparency and assurance to build trust in the GSA's actions. In general, respondents called for science and management transparency and accountability to demonstrate funds are used effectively to address groundwater problems. Additionally, a recurring concern was that initial fees or monitoring requirements would inevitably increase over time without checks and balances. Residents asked for assurances against "fees that increase over time with no restrictions."

4. Unintended Consequences

Respondents identified a range of potential consequences that the District should be cautious about. Residents warned that strict water restrictions could compromise physical safety, specifically regarding wildfire protection (maintaining green "defensible space"). Additionally, many emphasized that groundwater is a property right and felt that restrictions would unfairly devalue their land and investments.

5. Environmental Values

Respondents expressed a strong desire for groundwater management solutions that align with natural systems (e.g., creek restoration) rather than engineered "fixes" like artificial recharge approaches that might introduce new risks (citing water quality concerns). Multiple agricultural respondents emphasized that farmers should be viewed as partners in environmental health (e.g., absorbing carbon and caretaking the land).

6. Inaccurate Narratives (Myth v Reality)

Several concerns appeared to be based on misconstrued perceptions, particularly that the District will require well metering, issue well moratoriums, take away water rights, and issue a tax that goes to the County’s General Fund. Despite these inaccurate perceptions, these reflect extremely valid community concerns, and a high priority need to clarify reality vs. myth.

What This Means for the Demand Management Program

The community's concerns were not just about groundwater — they were about trust, fairness, and being heard. These findings can help guide how the District prioritizes program elements and implementation.

Messaging and engagement must emphasize:

- Fairness
- Data-driven decision making
- Local control
- Simplicity
- Tradeoffs
- Clear, consistent communication
- Reassurance that metering won't be required
- Opportunities for feedback

Transparency is essential:

- What options were considered and their tradeoffs
- How fees are calculated
- How zone boundaries are drawn
- What triggers actions

Implications for Policy Design

- Fee structure considers the ability to pay
- Management zones require a clear scientific basis
- Robust appeal process
- Well-developed outreach strategy
- Opportunity to align with community values (local control + fairness)
- Commitment to review and adapt to be responsive to groundwater needs

Opportunities to Build Support

- Position demand management as preventing State takeover
- Pair fees with visible benefits (projects, well support, monitoring)
- Protections for domestic wells
- Identify shared goals and advance multi-beneficial efforts

What to Consider Next

- Where is additional analysis needed?
- How will we respond to the core concerns: fairness, affordability, trust?
- Are there specific engagement needs?
    - More and diverse ag perspectives given the small sample size
    - Mixed use: residential + ag ("hobby farms" or "rural estates")
    - Potentially subbasin-specific engagement
- Which issues need clarification before presenting to the public? (e.g., tradeoffs and cost-benefit value of different approaches)

Appendices

Appendix A - Survey Questions

Appendix B - Factsheet